



Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

Western Libraries Undergraduate Research Award

Western Libraries and the Learning Commons

2016

Shunga: Erotic Art in the Tokugawa Era

Rachael Redjou

Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wvu.edu/library_researchaward



Part of the [Asian Art and Architecture Commons](#), and the [Japanese Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Redjou, Rachael, "Shunga: Erotic Art in the Tokugawa Era" (2016). *Western Libraries Undergraduate Research Award*. 10.
https://cedar.wvu.edu/library_researchaward/10

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Western Libraries and the Learning Commons at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Western Libraries Undergraduate Research Award by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Warning

This report contains sexually explicit images

Shunga

Erotic Art in the Tokugawa Era



Rachael Redjou
EAST/LIBR 302
Winter 2016

From the beginning of the 17th century to the end of the 19th century, hundreds of erotic prints called “*shunga*” (春画- “spring pictures”) were being designed, printed, published, and consumed throughout Japan. Popular for over 200 years, *shunga*, with all its erotic and explicit imagery, is not really porn- at least not in the typical Western sense of the word. Intended for a rich consumer market as a popular commodity, *shunga* is a multilayered, incredibly diverse, and often humorous genre. Moreover, it was created by some of the most famous artists of the Tokugawa period (1600-1868). Formed from the fantasies of the floating world, *shunga* is filled with the fantastical impossibilities of inhuman positions, unbelievably sized genitals, and raunchy dialogue that ruins the seriousness of a scene. Its content runs from the very first stages of arousal through sheer exhaustion. It was comical, satirical, and technically illegal after 1722. The examination of *shunga* from several perspectives is necessary to understand its place within the larger culture of this era. By treating *shunga* first as “art” and focusing on thematic elements, production techniques, and the historical attitudes towards sex and sexually related imagery in the broader culture, we come to understand that *shunga* was not just art, it was an economic boon during the Edo period.

Sex and Erotic Art in Japan

By the time of the Tokugawa, there had been a long history of erotic art and secular sexual expression in Japan, which meant that *shunga* was nothing new. Prehistoric societies had developed phallic worship in connection with their reliance on agriculture and Japan’s creation myths are based on human-like sexual procreation. Throughout the centuries, the phallus and phallus shaped objects (for example, mushrooms) had been prominent figures in carvings, could be found in shrines, festivals, and along roadways, and were traditionally and superstitiously

related with good luck, health, and longevity.¹ Though very few original scrolls exist, we know from the long-standing tradition of faithful copying of original works that erotic medieval narrative scrolls contained intimate scenes and later scrolls showed more explicit, but comedic, phallic contests (*kachi-e*- “pictures of contests”- discussed later) between men.²

What allowed for such an openness of sexual imagery and expression was the lack of any strict religious code that controlled sexual behavior. Unlike in the West, which was dominated by a strict Judeo-Christian ideology, there was no moral shame and stigma surrounding sex or the production of erotic images in Japan- only a stringent class system based on Confucianism that dictated appropriate social relations.³ Sex in Japan also did not take on any “mythical” or religious significance as it did in India or China.⁴ Furthermore, humor and wit had developed over the centuries as a common part of sexuality and was incorporated into the broader culture via allusions, euphemisms, sexually related stories, and poetry.⁵ These and other cultural/ religious factors allowed sex to be seen as a more naturalistic, enjoyable experience between partners, which in turn produced a wide array of acceptable sexual behaviors, including same-sex partners, and sexually related products such as sex toys, manuals, and even a chain of sex stores.⁶ By the time of the Tokugawa, the normalcy and humor found in sex, highly developed forms of sexual expressions, and the lack of moral or religious control all translated into an early modern culture that allowed *shunga* to flourish as a genre of popular art.

Shunga as Printed Art

Cover Image: Kitagawa Utamaro, *No Title*. 18th-19th century, color woodblock print, 17.7 x 25.8 cm. Fine Art Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco. From: ARTstor, <http://library.artstor.org/> (Accessed March 2, 2016).

¹ Tom and Mary Anne Evans, *Shunga: The Art of Love in Japan* (New York: Paddington Press, 1975), 41-42.

² Timothy Clark et al., eds. *Shunga Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art* (North America: Hotei, 2013), 64-69.

³ Rosina Buckland, *Shunga Erotic Art In Japan* (New York: Overlook Press, 2013), 12.

⁴ Evans, *Shunga: The Art*, 10-11.

⁵ Evens, *Shunga: The Art*, 46.

⁶ See Evans, *Shunga: The Art*, 38-53 for a more in-depth look at the history of sexual acceptance/ representation in Japan, particularly as it relates to Japanese religions.

Shunga is one of the six main subgenres⁷ nestled under the broader umbrella category of “pictures of the floating world” or, *ukiyo-e* (浮世絵), a style of art that was used almost exclusively during the Tokugawa period. Beginning its development in the early 16th century, *ukiyo-e*, which included both painting and printed illustration design, was a unique genre of art that typically depicted the everyday life and culture of Japanese urban commoners, or the *chōnin* (町人).⁸ Like its name suggests, *ukiyo-e* was also firmly associated with the entertainment and pleasure districts of urban cities, which were literally called the “floating world”. It is estimated that over two-thirds of *ukiyo-e* produced in the 17th and 18th centuries focused on the prostitutes, kabuki actors, and other famous figures of the floating world.⁹ Unlike most traditional Japanese art, *ukiyo-e*, and by extension *shunga*, was the manifestation of urban popular culture (discussed more below) and while *ukiyo-e* did not rely on any one established art school, its quality was always exceedingly high¹⁰ as it used the latest printing and design techniques and was created by some of the most talented hands of the day.

Like all *ukiyo-e* prints, *shunga* was made with woodblock printing technology, which for the first time in Japan’s history, blossomed as urban demand for printed materials grew enough to justify its costs. While technically woodblock printing had been utilized well before the 17th century,¹¹ the little that was printed was limited to small works of scripture and doctrine produced

⁷ Chris Uhlenbeck and Margarita Winkel, *Japanese Erotic Fantasies: Sexual Imagery of the Edo Period* (Amsterdam: Hotei, 2005), 11.

⁸ A very broad term used to encompass the urban class, which ranged from poor laborers to hairdressers to the wealthiest of merchants. This group would have captured the people in only the lower social classes and therefore, would have excluded all ranks of samurai, regardless of their actual wealth or status.

⁹ Richard Lane, *Images from the Floating World* (New York: Putnam, 1978), 21.

¹⁰ Lane, *Images*, 10.

¹¹ John Whitney, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan*. Vol. 4, *Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1991), 726.

by Buddhist monasteries.¹² With the importation of moveable type printing from Korea in the 1590's, printing expanded beyond monasteries and became an activity for the cultural and military elite. Even then, it was limited due to exorbitant costs.¹³ By 1700, however, printing had fully transitioned into the commercial realm and printed material as a popular commodity (for example, books for reading and entertainment) had become a basic part of the economic order and social culture of Japan.¹⁴ As demand for printed material rose during the 1600's, publishers transitioned back to woodblocks because it became the more economic method of printing.¹⁵

Illustrations were first drawn on thin paper and then this paper would be placed on the block to act as a guide. The image itself was subsequently created by carving away at excess wood, leaving only the required lines behind. After ink was applied, a sheet of paper would be laid across the block and pressed into the wood to create the printed illustration.¹⁶ Using this method, mass quantities of an image could be created both effectively and efficiently because once the blocks were carved into the desired image or text, they could be used to print multiple runs of the same image with minimal difficulty. In comparison, once an order was completed using moveable type, the letters were disassembled for use in the next work, which made printing another run of any given image time consuming and expensive. Additionally, it was easier to print illustrations with text incorporated into the body of the image (the method favored at this time) with woodblock printing than it was to try to incorporate movable type and an image.¹⁷ Finally, it seems that woodblock printing may have been preferred because it connected the artist to the reader through

¹² Peter Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 20.

¹³ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 726.

¹⁴ Kornicki, *The Book*, 20-21, 38.

¹⁵ Lawrence Marceau, "Cultural Developments in Tokugawa Japan," in *A Companion to Japanese History*, ed. William Tsutsui (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 121.

¹⁶ See Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 325-350 for explanations regarding printing techniques and materials used in *ukiyo-e*.

¹⁷ Marceau, "Cultural Developments," 121.

personalized, uniquely distinguishable calligraphy-text, created by the artist's hand rather than a set image of a character.¹⁸

Ukiyo-e was often at the center of woodblock printing (today they are considered practically synonymous with each other), and it was here that new printing techniques were developed, perfected, and utilized the most. For example it was *ukiyo-e* artists that first used colored printing to its fullest extent.¹⁹ Up until the 1740's, images had been created in black and white by using a single block (a key block) and then any colors (typically reds and greens) were later added by hand.²⁰ However, hand coloring was very limited as each color necessitated the production of another block, which increased cost. However, in 1765, *ukiyo-e* artist Suzuki Harunobu developed full color printing, which lead to an explosion of colors across the genre.²¹ Various other special printing techniques were used throughout *ukiyo-e* and *shunga*, and formats for printed pages (size, width, compiled end products, etc.) often changed to suite demand. These evolutions are why we see such a variety in the formats and styles of *shunga* throughout its production history.

There were several different terms used during the Tokugawa period to refer to erotic or explicit *ukiyo-e* style images. Demonstrating the association between sex and humor during this era, the most common term used during this period was *warai-e* (笑絵), or “laughing pictures”.²² However, aside from “laughing”, *warai-e* may also have had more explicit sexual undertones²³ (due to synonyms and translation in Japanese), and it has even been proposed that it actually meant

¹⁸ Kornicki, *The Book*, 26-30. Please see pages 26-30 for a more detailed explanation of handwritten calligraphy vs printed text in woodblock printing.

¹⁹ Amy Reigle Newland, ed., *Hotei Encyclopedia* 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Hotei, 2005), 75.

²⁰ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 58.

²¹ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 69-72, 93

²² Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 50.

²³ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 378.

“masturbation”.²⁴ If we consider the possible dual meaning of this term, the interpretation of *shunga* necessarily changes from “laughing pictures” to something more akin to “masturbation pictures”. *Makura-e* (枕絵- pillow pictures), *nure-e* (濡絵- wet pictures), and *higa* (秘画-hidden pictures) were other commonly employed terms.²⁵ For less explicitly erotic images, such as prints where women’s skin (and sometimes their vulvas) could be visually appreciated, *abuna-e* (危絵- “risqué pictures”) was used.²⁶ Erotic illustrated books (as opposed to single sheet prints or the more common set of twelve prints) were called “amorous books” (艶本-*enpon* or *ehon*), “pillow books” (枕本-*makurabon*)²⁷, or simply “erotic books” (春本- *shunpon*).²⁸

“*Shunga*,” which translates as “spring pictures”, as spring represented a time of burgeoning romance, love, and consequently, sex between couples,²⁹ was originally an abbreviation of “shunkyū higa”, (translated as “secret pictures of the spring palace”). This was the Japanese term for the Chinese tradition that necessitated the ruler sleep with twelve women (one for each month) to keep the cosmos in balance.³⁰³¹ However, “*shunga*” is a relatively more modern term with some sources saying it appeared in the early 18th century,³² but others placing it more towards the early 19th century.³³ Irrespective of the dates, *shunga* is now the catch-all term for erotic *ukiyo-e* images and, today, researchers and historians typically only use “*shunga*” to refer to *ukiyo-e* style erotic images, except when a specific term is required. We will similarly be using the term *shunga* to

²⁴ Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World Erotic Images in Japan 1700-1820* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 14.

²⁵ Hayakawa Monta, *Shunga: Ten Questions and Answers*, trans. C. Andrew Gerstle (Kyoto: International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2013), 14.

²⁶ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 170.

²⁷ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 17.

²⁸ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 79.

²⁹ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 13.

³⁰ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 13.

³¹ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 16.

³² Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 18

³³ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 79.

discuss all works with erotic or sexually explicit content and only the more specific terms when necessary.

Visual elements of *Shunga*

As is typical of most art, the settings, content, and characters of *shunga* are incredibly diverse. To think of *shunga* as just “images of people having sex” is very limiting because more often than not, when we look at *shunga*, we are presented with an exceptionally complex image that can only be fully appreciated if one understands all of its artistic and cultural components. As mentioned before, because of the length of time that *shunga* was produced, several different factors, including advances in printing technology, changes to the preferred publishing format, and the influence of artistic and consumer trends greatly affected the genre as a whole. Furthermore, since almost all *ukiyo-e* artists, regardless of their training and background, also produced *shunga*, each artist produced a slightly different product. Finally, like other *ukiyo-e* pieces, *shunga* ranged from being made with the highest quality materials of the day to low-quality reprints of images copied from other works. This, too, resulted in tremendous variety within the broader field of *shunga*. However, while accounting for artistic and technological differences, most of the thematic characteristics remained fairly stable throughout the Edo period. Therefore, while we will be discussing only a few main features of *shunga*, those elements, when present, can be analyzed consistently across the genre.

First, we will look at the characters and relationships shown in the erotic art itself. Despite *shunga*’s relationship with the pleasure district, most people shown were, in fact, not prostitutes and their clients (discussed more below). It is estimated that up to 90 % of the people in *shunga* were everyday, urban commoners. They came from a variety of occupations, had different class

backgrounds, and varied tremendously in age.³⁴ The relationships and sexual encounters shown in *shunga* are almost as diverse as the characters themselves. While it was not uncommon to see same-sex lovers (though we cannot call them “gay” or “lesbian” relationships because of entirely different conceptualizations of gender and sexuality), most couples (or groups) in *shunga* were comprised of a man and a woman. Not all couples were shown to be married, however, as widows with energetic younger lovers, cheating husbands and wives, impossible affairs, orgies, and lone masturbators were also frequently portrayed. Finally, in contrast to what is perhaps considered the norm in many Western pornographic images, women and their pleasure, desire, and engagement in sex was often shown to be just as important and complete as the men’s. Many women are depicted as responding enthusiastically to the pursuit of pleasure in their private world, and we regularly see (rather, read about) them urging on their lovers or commenting on their desire for sex.³⁵³⁶

As another point, sexual pleasure often played a key role in the ethos of the image. When we examine the looks of ecstasy, smiles, intense gazes, thrown back heads, and other facial features and bodily reactions depicted in *shunga*, it seems like, for the most part, both men and women thoroughly enjoyed their lover’s company. Only a small portion of images show one-sided desire for sex (mostly husbands coming on to their busy wives) or sexual violence. As for the acts themselves, most couples were shown engaging in some degree of vaginal sex. However, a wide range of other sexual activities, including anal and oral sex, were also depicted. Interestingly, despite the pure explicitness of sex in *shunga*, the act of oral sex is very rarely fully shown (out of the hundreds I have looked at during research, I have seen two). The majority of images that show

³⁴ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 15.

³⁵ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 39.

³⁶ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 75-76.

oral sex only offer clear allusions to cunnilingus (and on an even more limited basis, fellatio). There is nothing in the research that clarifies exactly why this is, but perhaps images of oral sex pushed the boundaries of what private sexual activities could be drawn. Or, it may simply not have been a big part of the sexual experience of people in Tokugawa Japan and therefore, it was not shown very often.

Sex toys (*warai dōgu*-laughter devices) also played a large role in *shunga* by providing sexual pleasure to their users, particularly women. When maids, court ladies, nuns and other women that typically did not have access to men or who could not leave their master's houses were shown in *shunga* (either when masturbating alone, or paired with another partner (usually female)), sex toys such as dildos and lube were employed as a replacement for the company of a man. In addition to showing toys or telling stories that included them, erotic books (*enpon*) sometimes contained catalogues of images or user guides, describing toys and their possible uses in the bedroom.³⁷³⁸ Aside from both hand-held dildos and strap on dildos (which were typically depicted being used by women), aphrodisiacs and lube, cock rings, artificial vaginas, and “armor and helmets” for the penis (ribbed tubes for texture and a helmet over the glans for stimulation) also have been shown in *shunga* images, although in smaller numbers. Usually sold in boxed sets that contained multiple toys, the quality of toys varied widely and they could be made of several different materials, including wood, horn, and metal.³⁹

³⁷ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 312.

³⁸ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 66.

³⁹ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 66.



Figure 1- Women Using a Dildo⁴⁰

Two women use a strap-on dildo, which was designed specifically to be used by women. The cream in the yellow container is being smeared on the dildo, acting as a lubricant. The woman on the left urges her partner to hurry and says she, “want[s] to come five or six times without stopping.”

As a last comment on sexual activities and characters, some may be wondering about images of the “darker” side of sex- namely, rape and other forms of sexual violence. With a small handful of exceptions, Tokugawa *shunga* typically did not contain these types of images and those that were created were almost exclusively produced during and after the mid-19th century.⁴¹ (This is about the same time Edo’s long reign of peace began its decline.⁴²) Largely, this lack of violence can be explained by one of the foremost characteristics of *shunga*- laughter. Humor, meaning both what could be taken as “funny” and what acted as a commentary on the sometimes foolish behavior of humans in sexual situations, was key, and this comedic element naturally stood as almost the complete opposite of sexual violence.⁴³ In the images of rape, necrophilia, and sexual assault that we do see, the male characters are drawn drastically different from other men in *shunga*. They

⁴⁰ Chōkyosai Eishō, *Women Using a Dildo*, from *Pure Drawings of Female Beauty*. 1801, color woodblock print, 25.5 x 38.4 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. In: Clark et al. *Shunga Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*. North America: Hotei, 2013. Cat 83; 310. Accompanying information, Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 311.

⁴¹ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 39, 129.

⁴² Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 381.

⁴³ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 378-379.

almost always appear as ugly, extremely hairy, big nosed brutes⁴⁴. The visual representations of men, along with the complete absence of “laughter” or any sense of communicable harmony between partners, makes these more grotesque sexual images vividly stand out from the rest of the genre.⁴⁵

The next element we will discuss is perhaps one of the most obvious (and sometimes most shocking!) characteristics of Japanese erotic images. In *shunga*, men’s penises are often inconceivably large, and while it is a bit more difficult to see, women’s vulvas are also much larger than anatomically correct. This phenomenon of exaggerated male genitalia is thought to have originated from “*kachi-e*”.⁴⁶ Also known as “victory pictures” or “pictures of contests” (though they never show “victors” in any of the known scrolls⁴⁷), art historians use “*kachi-e*” to refer to medieval handscrolls that contained images of “phallic contests”. In these contests, men with penises perhaps half the size of their body were measured and seen performing amazing feats with their genitals. They also included humorous “farting contest” between men. While these images were not meant to be erotic and never showed women or sexual intercourse, it is theorized that *kachi-e* provided some groundwork for Edo period *shunga* both because of its similar depiction of male genitals and due to the long-standing Japanese tradition of faithfully copying classical works and adapting their themes and narratives to new pieces. This tradition stayed true, even with *shunga*, as we see phallic contests being used in later *shunga* compositions.⁴⁸⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 380.

⁴⁵ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 381.

⁴⁶ Akiko Yano, “Historiography of the “Phallic Contest” Handscroll in Japanese Art,” *Japan Review*, no. 26 (2013): 60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41959817>.

⁴⁷ Yano, “Historiography”, 61.

⁴⁸ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 64.

⁴⁹ Yano, “Historiography”, 60, 78. Please see this source for a more detailed history of *kachi-e*.

At face value, the huge penises add a distinctly fantastical element to *shunga* and certainly more than an ounce of humor is produced when we look at the impossibility of their size. However, not every person is depicted this way. The young and old, irrespective of gender, were typically shown with regular sized genitalia and either no or only very little pubic hair. When we take a stylistic approach to our visual analysis of huge genitals, we can see that the genitals of both men and women are about the same size as their heads, creating the illusion of a highly “balanced” composition. However, this balance and the often “in your face” placement of the genitals meant that the body, particularly the woman’s, was often drawn into highly contorted, impossible poses.⁵⁰ We see in several prints that the positions of torsos, legs, hips, and heads were compromised in the pursuit of displaying the sexual organs to the viewer. In addition to the size and strategic placement of the genitals, the care with which detail was added to both the penis and the vulva also draws our attention straight to the genital area. In fact, when you examine people in *shunga*, it is really only the face, hair, clothes, and genitals that are illustrated with any real clarity.⁵¹ Every feature has been meticulously carved in order to produce individual strands of hair and finely detailed skin which not only places the image’s central focus on the act of sex itself, it demonstrates the time and talent that was put into *shunga* by *ukiyo-e* artists, carvers, and printers.

⁵⁰ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 49.

⁵¹ David Pollack, “The Cultural Environment of Edo *Shunga*,” *Impressions*, no. 31 (2010): 78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42597697>.

Figure 2- Handscroll for the Sleeve- 1785⁵²



One of eleven, this horizontal print zooms in on the lovers, and specifically on the man's penis. Note that the penis is almost the exact same size as the man's head. This creates a balance of white skin against either side of the woman's clothed torso. It also allows us to focus on the details of the penis (the strands of pubic hair and the wrinkled skin), as it is backdropped by her "plain" bottom and not the more extravagant details of her clothes.

Of course, it would sincerely behoove us to only focus on the overtly sexual elements of *shunga* because most of the complexity, context, and humor (such as sexual innuendos, puns, and slang⁵³) of *shunga* is not typically found in the bodies themselves, but in the dialogue incorporated into the image. As discussed previously, one of the primary reasons for the rapid transition back to woodblock printing from moveable type was its ability to easily accommodate the incorporation of text into illustrated images. Even a very cursory examination shows that this combination was always used in *shunga* production, despite a general increase in its use and significance as we moved closer to the early 1800's. A climax in the use of text in *shunga* can be seen in the work of the *ukiyo-e* artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849).⁵⁴⁵⁵ Particularly in his pieces dated around the 1820's, every inch of background space with text and no other artist used narrative text to the extent he did.

⁵² Torri Kiyonaga, *Handscroll for the Sleeve*. 1785, colored woodblock print, 12.7 x 66.6 cm. No Location Provided. From: The British Museum, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=781752&partId=1&searchText=shunga&page=1 (Accessed February, 17th 2016).

⁵³ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 50-51

⁵⁴ Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 149.

⁵⁵ See Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 130-141 and Lane, *Images*, 159-172 for more information on Hokusai's career and works.

The text in *shunga* can be placed into two categories: *kotoba-gaki* (詞書 – narratives) and *kaki-ire* (書入れ – dialogues). *Kotoba-gaki* is usually read as indirect, outside narrative that explain various aspects of the image and are written in more standard literary prose. By contrast, *kaki-ire* is emotive and descriptive dialogue spoken between the characters themselves⁵⁶. As the direct voice of the protagonists, *kaki-ire* was preferred by artists because it allowed them to openly explore and share the true emotions and desires of the characters with the readers⁵⁷. It also was the medium used to express much of the humor in *shunga*. For example, in Image 4 of the *Twelve Months of Love* series by Katsukawa Shunchō, a married couple is having sex in the window of their house when the male protagonist rejoices the fact that they have had sex nine times already. He then says he is really looking forward to another seven or eight times that day.⁵⁸ In reality, that much sex in one day is almost impossible, but the dialogue adds to the comedic element of this print. Overall, the importance of *kotoba-gaki* and *kaki-ire* cannot be understated, because without this text, things like the nature of the sexual relationship, the protagonists’ feelings and desires, and even context of the situation would sometimes be impossible to understand.

Figure 3- *Threads Leading to Desire, Image 7*⁵⁹

This image is an example of how text incorporated into the image is essential for our comprehension. Just seeing the image, we may perhaps assume this to be a married couple enjoying sex after their bath. However, after reading the text, we learn that both partners are married to other people. The woman is lamenting the ugliness of her husband and the shortness of his penis, while the man soothes her by saying that soon he will make her his wife. Only from the dialogue do we see that this is actually an affair scene.

⁵⁶ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 25.

⁵⁷ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 162, 169.

⁵⁸ Translation and image found in Monta, *Ten Questions*, 18.

⁵⁹ Kitagawa Utamaro, *Threads Leading to Desire, Image 7*. 1799, color woodblock print, 25.4 x 38.2 cm. In: Clark et al. *Shunga Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*. North America: Hotei, 2013. Cat 43: 210. Translation of text in image’s description found in: Monta, *Ten Questions*, 33.



The two interrelated concepts of clothing and gender also play an important role in *shunga*. In many prints, particularly those from the 17th century, it is difficult to determine the gender of the characters based on their bodies alone. Unlike in the West with its “Nude” genre,⁶⁰ there historically was no artistic drive to depict the “perfect” male or female body in Japan.⁶¹ This meant that the primary focus was not on secondary sexual characteristics such as muscles and broad shoulders for men or rounder shoulders and hips for women.⁶² Rather, faces, arms, legs, and torsos were often drawn in a comparable manner, creating similarly constructed lovers. Additionally, naked bodies in Japan were not inherently sexualized as public nudity, particularly in bathhouses,⁶³ would have been common during this time. Since there was not at a history of depicting detailed bodies, there was no erotic element to them that would have increased the sensual nature of

⁶⁰ The “Nude” was the idealized representation of a naked female or male body as depicted by Western artists. In European art, this genre was second only to history paintings and the depicting of a perfect body was seen as an end unto itself. Emphasis was largely placed on secondary characteristics such as muscles and body shape to stress external sexual differences between men and women. As discussed in Screech, *Sex*, 101-102, and Ellis Tinios, “Art, Anatomy and Eroticism: The Human Body in Japanese Illustrated Books of the Edo Period, 1615-1868,” *East Asian Science, Technology, And Medicine*, no. 31 (2010): 45, 53, <http://www.eastm.org/index.php/journal/article/view/215/202>.

⁶¹ Tinios, “Art, Anatomy,” 45, 53.

⁶² Screech, *Sex*, 99-100.

⁶³ See Tinios, “Art, Anatomy,” 46-55 for a more detailed look at nudity in Japanese art and its use in *ukiyo-e* and *shunga* bathhouse scenes.

shunga.⁶⁴ Instead of depicting the body as the place of sexual interest and gender differentiation, artists used genitals, clothing (which was highly gendered at the time), personal belongings, hairstyles,⁶⁵ and possible differences in skin tone as the primary markers of gender. These extraneous elements were often heavily emphasized in order to increase the eroticism of an image.⁶⁶

In early *shunga*, genitals acted as the main centerpiece for gender and sexual desire since clothing was not necessarily illustrated. As the depiction of clothing in *shunga* became more prominent early in the 18th century⁶⁷, it often times highlighted or even replaced the genitals as the focal point of an image. Through the perception of colors, patterns, folds, and the imagined texture of fine cloth on skin, the eroticism of the scene was accentuated.⁶⁸⁶⁹ The inclusion of expensive clothing in many illustrations added the illusion of luxury to *shunga*, as most would never have been able to afford such opulence.⁷⁰ Clothing could also be used practically in a scene (as bedding or in the form of a hat to show the rank of an otherwise naked man) or just for decoration or narrative detail.⁷¹ There is speculation that clothing added realism to the image as it is likely that people of this period did not undress completely during intercourse.⁷²

Overall, clothing depicted in *shunga* was mostly used to cover the body (which again, was not seen as a sexualized object) and frame the enlarged genitals as the central piece of an erotic

⁶⁴ Screech, *Sex*, 104, 110. See pages 88-128 for an in-depth examination of the body and clothes as used in *shunga*.

⁶⁵ Screech, *Sex*, 95, 100.

⁶⁶ Screech, *Sex*, 100, 104, 108, 110.

⁶⁷ Sumie Jones, ed. *Imaging/ Reading Eros: Proceedings for the Conference, Sexuality and Edo Culture, 1750-1850*, Indiana University, Bloomington August 17-20, 1995 (Bloomington, IN: East Asian Studies Center Indiana University, 1996), 63.

⁶⁸ Screech, *Sex*, 117-118.

⁶⁹ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 68.

⁷⁰ Screech, *Sex*, 118-119.

⁷¹ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 63.

⁷² Screech, *Sex*, 118.

image.⁷³ This highlighted the eroticism of the image by emphasizing the contrast between the vibrant details of the fabric and the skin of the man or woman.⁷⁴ It was then this pull between “concealing and revealing” that often gave *shunga* its high levels of constrained sensuality, as it caused the viewer to focus on the minute details to effectively “read” the emotions and sexual tension of a scene.⁷⁵

Figure 4- Untitled Print, Image 6⁷⁶



This image is a good example of how clothing and personal items, rather than bodies, were often used to exemplify gender. It would be difficult to tell which partner was what gender if we just examined the bodies as hairstyles, faces, and torsos were drawn in a similar manner. Of course, the genitals are the obvious clue, but the floral vs checkered patterns of the clothes and the swords placed above the left character's head also act as gender markers for the characters in the image.

As the last part of our visual analysis, we will cover voyeurism, or the act of watching, as it was used and implied in *shunga*. As one looks through *shunga* prints, the use of voyeurism appears repeatedly, but unless one is aware of the different ways the concept of “watching” was used, it is difficult to notice voyeurism in all of its manifestations. As the most “internal” layer of watching, mirrors are used in several prints to allow the characters to either see their own faces during intercourse or to look at their genitals during sex. In general, mirrors were used in *ukiyo-e* and *shunga* to “double the pleasure of seeing”, meaning they reflected the desirable sections of an image (usually the genitals) back to the viewer so it could be seen twice, typically from different

⁷³ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 65.

⁷⁴ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 64.

⁷⁵ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 68.

⁷⁶ Sugimura Jehei. *Untitled Print, Image 6*. Mid-1680's, woodblock print, 26 x 36.2 cm. In: Clark et al. *Shunga Sex and Pleasure in Japanese Art*. North America: Hotei, 2013. Cat 26: 126-127.

angles⁷⁷. The use of mirrors in *shunga* intensified the sexual nature of a scene by allowing the viewers to watch the couple watch themselves and by again framing the genitals as the focal point on the image.

However, even without mirrors, characters in *shunga* are often already being watched. Caught up in their own passions, they do not see (or do not pay attention to) the servants, maids, or other peeping-toms that look in at them, having been drawn to the scene by a sound or the allure of secretly watching. This addition of an internal third person constitutes the second layer of voyeurism. To illustrate the third person's heightened level of arousal, artists commonly drew voyeurs in the act of masturbation, either with their hand or with a toy. Sometimes, there would be human voyeurs painted on screens or art displayed in the background of the *shunga* print itself. These figure paintings could either act as a sexual innuendo (to add another layer of complexity or humor to a scene), or they could literally be watching the lovers themselves.⁷⁸

In these cases, the third person, internal voyeur could be seen as a representation of the external viewer's own position in relation to *shunga*. That is to say, the location of the internal voyeur allows the viewer to identify with them as an outsider watcher. However, the viewer could also remain in a more objective position, seeing the painted voyeur as simply another element of the sex scene in its entirety. To further engage the external viewer in their role of "watching", artists often created the *potential* for voyeurism by placing characters in impromptu sex scenes, ones defined by rushed desire and the need for secrecy (after all, many of them were having illicit affairs). Observing the image from an externalized perspective, the viewer is able sense to that at any moment the careless lovers might be caught mid-act. Of course, this sense of danger is only perceived because the viewer has the cognitive ability to imagine the continuation of the storyline.

⁷⁷ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 85-86.

⁷⁸ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 81.

Always reaching for originality and creativity, artists used spacious locations both in and outside the house to invite the possibility of spying and eavesdropping⁷⁹. Lovers are shown having sex on open verandas, in the bottom of boats, and in other easily discoverable places, like in windows or stairwells. Scenes set in baths and bathhouses were also very common. In addition to people already being naked (which naturally invited the possibility of sexual arousal and sex), bathhouses were public places and therefore included the risk of being caught engaging in sexual activities.⁸⁰ In these scenes, women were often depicted either bent over a tub or with their leg raised high as they got into the tub, providing the external viewer, the possible peeping tom, and her husband or lover a tantalizing glimpse that inevitably left the male characters within the image aroused.

As impossible as these sex scenes seems to us now, voyeurism as we see in *shunga* is probably a reasonable depiction of what would have been possible during this period. While we cannot deny that some instances might be exaggerated for the sake of sexual fantasy, bustling city life and the realities of the time would have made true privacy difficult. Cities overflowed with people and space, both within residential and commercial buildings, would have been very limited. With perhaps only a thin paper screen to separate activates, rooms would have been shared with adults and children alike. The open architectural design typical of the period and the use of wood (with all its chinks and lack of sound-proofing) would have allowed others plenty of opportunity to see or overhear couples engaged in sex.⁸¹⁸²⁸³ Furthermore, servants and maids would have always been present, moving throughout the house unannounced as they attended to chores and

⁷⁹ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 97-98.

⁸⁰ Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 98.

⁸¹ Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 179.

⁸² Screech, *Sex*, 32, 196-197.

⁸³ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 42.

their master's needs.⁸⁴ As a result, regardless if you were rich or poor, were inside a house or in the pleasure districts, opportunities to watch or be watched, whether wanted or not, were almost certainly frequent.⁸⁵

Figure 5- No Known Title⁸⁶



A maid has come in with a cup of tea and ends up masturbating while watching a seemingly unsuspecting couple from in front of the screen. Note how the screen divides the image in half, separating us (the voyeurs) from the couple.

Figure 5- No Known Title⁸⁷



This couple is having sex on an open-air veranda in the middle of winter. Despite the snow, a worker (in blue) is present in the background. This scene exudes a sense of rushed "danger," as any second the worker could look up and catch the couple mid-act.

Just from this brief analysis of *shunga*, we can see *shunga* artists invested mass amounts of time and talent into their creations. Reflecting reality, the characters and the sex acts depicted in *shunga* were incredibly varied. The graphic depiction of enlarged genitals focused our attention directly onto the act of sex itself while patterns, colors, and textures of cloth served to both

⁸⁴ Screech, *Sex*, 193-196.

⁸⁵ See Screech, *Sex*, 193-212 and Jones, *Imaging/ Reading Eros*, 85-92 for a more comprehensive look at voyeurism in *shunga*.

⁸⁶ Isoda Koryūsai (attributed to), *Shunga Print*. 1772-1773, color woodblock print, 18.8 x 24.8 cm. No Location Provided. From: The British Museum, London, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=781700&partId=1&searchText=shunga&page=2 (Accessed February 18, 2016).

⁸⁷ Keisai Eisan (attributed to), *Shunga/ Egoyomi*. 1820, color woodblock print, 9.4 x 12.8 cm. No Location Provided. From: The British Museum, London, http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=778535&partId=1&searchText=shunga&sortBy=fromDateDesc&view=list&page=3 (Accessed February 24, 2016).

illustrate gender and heighten the eroticism of a scene. Text and narrative dialogue was often used in scenes to convey desire and other emotions or to elaborate upon the setting of an image. Finally, while multiple layers of voyeurism increased the visual intensity of a scene, the physical presence of a watcher specifically heightened the perceived eroticism of voyeuristic *shunga* prints. Overall, it would have taken a keen eye and a strong familiarity with period culture, art, and humor to fully comprehend and appreciate how the various components of a *shunga* print worked together to create a complex scene of eroticism.

Purpose of Shunga

The question remains as to why such sexually explicit art was made in the first place. Only when we thoroughly examine the economic and cultural trends of this era are we able to see that the underlying cause of *shunga*'s production was profit. *Shunga* was, first and foremost, a commodity. Produced and sold by Japan's printing/ publishing industry within a profit framework, *shunga* was heavily consumed by a continually growing urban population with the money, education, and time to spend on the pursuit of personal pleasure. The road that led to *shunga*'s production as a commodity is, like many other things, long and complex. To understand the fundamental purpose of *shunga*, we must examine the growth of a wealthy merchant class, the rise of literacy, the development of the publishing industry and *ukiyo-e*, and finally the creation of a unique urban culture cultivated within the pleasure and entertainment districts of major cities.

The Rise of the Merchant Class and Chōnin Culture

The earliest part of *shunga*'s story begins with the rise of the merchant class and the creation of an urban population. Between 1550 and 1700, mass migrations lead to huge swells in urban populations. First, various policy changes enacted by the Tokugawa clan and copied by daimyo across Japan had samurai acting as the first wave of migrants to castle towns. Then,

throughout the first century of the Tokugawa era (1600-1700), due to dramatic increases in residential and commercial construction demands and the elite's reliance on others for the production and acquisition of everyday goods and materials, droves of peasants, laborers, merchants, and artisans came to these newly grown cities to fill tens of thousands of new job openings.⁸⁸ Particularly in Edo (what today is Tokyo), the need to construct the new capital initially pulled workers from more rural areas. The Alternate Residence system⁸⁹ enacted by the Shogun in the 1630's only continued this trend of urban migration. As people continued pour into cities, urban development and material consumption only continued to grow. These changes to the basic social structure of Japan made it one of the most urbanized countries in the world by the year 1700 as it boasted several cities exceeding the 100,000 mark and the world's largest city, Edo.⁹⁰

Concurrent to the rise of urban centers was the economic rise of the merchant class. In general, cities acted as consumers, not producers, so everything from food to luxury lacquerware was brought into the cities by merchants and sold in markets. Other major commercial developments such as the opening of new, more permanent markets, the standardization of weights and coins, and new highways, bridges, and ports also factored into Japan's quickly expanding economy. In Edo, daimyo and samurai had to maintain huge residences and keep up appearances in accordance with their social status. This required them exchange their fixed stipends of rice for cash from the wily merchants in order to buy needed goods. Between city expenses, travel between domains, and Shogunate taxes, the elites' expense rates quickly outpaced their fixed incomes. This

⁸⁸ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 524-526.

⁸⁹ The alternate residence system was a policy that ensured the loyalty and control of the daimyo by requiring them to spend every other year in Edo. Their wives and children were forced to live in Edo permanently, essentially making them hostages to the Shogun. This system resulted in dramatic increases in population as the rich daimyo came to Edo with their huge retainers of samurai and other followers. Consequently, particularly in Edo- which had only recently (1600) been made capital-there was an even larger demand for construction (of homes, roads, the Shogun's castle) and production of goods that drew literally thousands of workers to what had been only a small fishing village a few decades before. As discussed in Whitney, *Cambridge*, 564-565.

⁹⁰ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 519.

forced the elite to focus on economic policies that favored commerce and trade among the merchant class, as new sources of income were needed. Even still, loans from moneylenders and rich merchants were eventually needed to meet expenses.⁹¹

As a result of unprecedented economic development, many people within the merchant and urban classes faced never before seen levels of prosperity.⁹² Yet regardless of their wealth, rigid feelings of social division based on long-standing Confucian class ideals kept merchants and city laborers (*chōnin*) at the bottom. Socially prevented from taking on jobs in politics or administration and lacking any other moral/ social obligation, *chōnin* turned their attention and energy to what they could do to- use their free time and wealth on fashion, food, entertainment (like kabuki theater and art), and physical pleasures like sex. Thanks to their otherworldly feel, the hedonistic districts containing the licensed brothels, theaters, teahouses, etc., became known as the “floating world”. By the 1660’s, the rising *chōnin* class replaced the “elite” as the main patrons of these entertainment and pleasure districts,⁹³ allowing the floating world to act as the cultural center for many upper and middle-class *chōnin*⁹⁴.

From the Rise of Literacy to Shunga

Parallel to the economic rise of the *chōnin* class (even to the point of some surpassing samurai and other elites in terms of wealth) and the development of their own alternative culture within the floating world was the growth of literacy and by way of opportunity and public demand, the rise of the printing/ publishing industry. The social and economic changes occurring within the Japanese state at this time translated into an ever growing complexity of commerce and trade, law, travel, culture, etc. These changes demanded that everyone (including women of all social classes)

⁹¹ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 542-547.

⁹² Whitney, *Cambridge*, 568-569.

⁹³ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 744.

⁹⁴ Lane, *Images*, 21.

be literate- at least enough to understand and write basic kana.⁹⁵⁹⁶ The increase of literacy and education levels among both elite and *chōnin* classes naturally resulted in a huge demand for a variety (in both difficulty and content) of reading materials. This demand was filled by the publishing and printing industries of Osaka, Kyoto, and Edo as they competed to provide illustrated books, classic and popular literature, and other printed materials to a rich and eager consumer market.

For the first several decades of the Tokugawa period, the consumer publishing market was dominated by the ancient city of Kyoto.⁹⁷ It was here that the first connections between the floating world and the publishing industry were seen as entrepreneurial publishers in Kyoto created detailed guidebooks, maps, and etiquette manuals for city residents and visitors. These guidebooks highlighted the attractions of the pleasure districts as much as they did the palace and any other famous location. Soon after, in both Kyoto and Edo, guides containing the names, price, locations, and talents of higher-ranking courtesans appeared for both practical and potentially voyeuristic purposes.⁹⁸ Eventually, Edo was able to overtake the printing industry, and by the middle of the 18th century, it functioned as both the center of *chōnin* culture and as the center for publishing and printing.⁹⁹

As Edo had the largest population and the best known licensed pleasure district (the *Yoshiwara*), it also became the largest producer of *ukiyo-e*. As discussed earlier, the *ukiyo-e* style began its development in the early 1600's, but it was not until the 1660's that the style was firmly

⁹⁵ Marceau, "Cultural Developments," 119.

⁹⁶ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 715. Please see pages 715-725 for a more detailed examination of education and literacy in Tokugawa Japan.

⁹⁷ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 733.

⁹⁸ Whitney, *Cambridge*, 741-745.

⁹⁹ Kornicki, *The Book*, 173-174, 199-200.

established with the work of Hishikawa Moronobu.¹⁰⁰ *Ukiyo-e* artists, who were mostly based in Edo, were strongly associated with *chōnin* class and culture as the print medium and the publication of series as well as single print sheets allowed their works to be distributed throughout the broader culture.¹⁰¹ Incredibly popular, *ukiyo-e* prints typically featured the famed courtesans of the *Yoshiwara* and the glorified stars of the theater world. As handbills, calendars, or in another form of printed material, *ukiyo-e* images acted like souvenirs of the floating world. For those who could never afford to see or spend time with the most beautiful of women of Japan, realistic *ukiyo-e* images of these beauties might have been perceived as the best available alternative.

Because of *ukiyo-e*'s popularity and the constant demand for new forms of entertainment, economic competition between publishers would have required them to keep the *chōnin* interested in their products by continually producing new and engaging works.¹⁰² It was perhaps this need for material and the desire for profit that led to *shunga*'s development as a subgenre of *ukiyo-e*. Given that Japan already had a history of erotic art, the leap from portraits of courtesans to sex scenes would not have been huge, especially given the commercialization of sex as it occurred in both licensed and unlicensed city brothels. Early *shunga* could consequently be seen as another representation of the floating world, a field created by artists already working to illustrate urban characters and activities. While the exact timeline for *shunga*'s development relative to the larger genre of *ukiyo-e* is hard to determine, we can conclude that it was the collision between the printing industry and its need for profit, the pleasure districts that acted as the center of commoner culture, and the increase in literacy concurrent to the rise of the *chōnin* class that ultimately resulted in *shunga*'s production as a popular commodity.

¹⁰⁰ Newland, *Hotei Encyclopedia*, 51-52.

¹⁰¹ Marceau, "Cultural Developments," 125.

¹⁰² Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 16.

Shunga as Profit

Aside from the old adage “sex sells”, it is theorized that *shunga* acted as a stable source of reusable material and income for publishers. Unlike other settings and figures in *ukiyo-e* (the beautiful woman, the courtesan, the actor, the sumo wrestler, etc.), the content of *shunga* did not change with the seasons (fashion or otherwise) nor were the prints based on the current “stars” of the pleasure and entertainment districts.¹⁰³ However, that stability did not translate into stagnation, as we often see *shunga* evolving to meet the needs of publishers and the demands of urban customers. As just one example of the plasticity of *shunga*, we can look back at our early discussion about the characters depicted in erotic prints.

Remember that most people in *shunga* were not prostitutes, but *chōnin*. Given that *shunga* was created from within the pleasure districts, it would seem logical that the featured characters would have been prostitutes and their clients. While this was certainly true of early *shunga*, there seems to have been a transition away from the use of prostitutes and courtesans beginning around 1700.¹⁰⁴ It has been theorized that this transition from courtesans to *chōnin* was caused by the limitations of the *Yoshiwara*. That is to say, there were only so many times artists could create sex scenes using prostitutes and their clients and keep their customers entertained. By expanding out into the “real” world, it was possible to create large quantities of original work that kept people continuously interested in new product.¹⁰⁵ This one example already points to the fact that *shunga* was primarily considered to be a marketable product that had to keep up with trends and popular interests in order to stay within the consumer’s field of vision.

¹⁰³ Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 16.

¹⁰⁴ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 417.

Shunga's mode of production also made (and saved) publishers money. Because *ukiyo-e* was produced using woodblocks rather than moveable type, the creation of *shunga* and other *ukiyo-e* images was highly economic. Thousands of prints could be made from the same block of wood, and those blocks' owners could store them in preparation for re-runs. This would have also increased publishers' return by allowing them to run the same material several times, with each run varying in terms of image quality, the grades of paper used, and changes to its covers and wrappings. These differences would have allowed *shunga* to be sold to various audiences at the appropriate price. Additionally, worn out sections of a block or pieces of an image that "dated" it (fashion and hairstyle trends were always changing in the cities) could also be easily fixed by replacing the old or worn section with a new piece of wood. This replacement technique (*umeki*) allowed for easy changes to the dialogue or content of an image, which meant that they (and other, less ethical publishers) could sell an old image as an entirely new work, even just a few years later.¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷

Finally, *shunga* continued to make the publishing industry money even outside of sales made directly to the consumer. We know that *shunga* was extensively circulated throughout the populous thanks to *kashihon-ya* (貸本屋 - "lending libraries"), which were well-developed commercial networks that allowed books to be spread throughout the entire country. *Kashihon-ya* seals and notices to borrowers (which have been found inside *shunga* books), writings from the period, and *shunga* images that show *kashihon-ya* agents showing *shunga* to clients point to *ehon* being a sizable portion of a lending library's stock.¹⁰⁸ These libraries were very popular because

¹⁰⁶ Kornicki, *The Book*, 52, 54.

¹⁰⁷ Ellis Tinios, "Japanese Illustrated Erotic Books in the Context of Commercial Publishing, 1660-1868," *Japan Review*, no. 26 (2013): 90-93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41959818>. Please see pages 90-93 for more information of the way publishers used *umeki* to change illustrations and increase their profits.

¹⁰⁸ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 302.

they made borrowing books incredibly convenient and affordable as agents brought books directly to an individual's house and rented them out for a small fee.¹⁰⁹ Theoretically, this allowed even the less affluent to have access to *shunga*,¹¹⁰ increasing its exposure and allowing publishers to both recoup the cost of production and possibly make an additional profit on their run if people decided to buy the work later on.¹¹¹

While we do not have the financial records to definitively prove that *shunga* made publishers money, we can infer from the points discussed above that it was profitable. We can also infer this due to the fact that *shunga* was produced for decades, even when its production was outlawed. Furthermore, if *shunga* did not created profit, why would publishers (whether it be the original publisher or someone stealing the image) put time and effort into editing the woodblock with the purpose of re-running an image? As a basic law of business, companies do not continue to produce items that do not, at the very least, compensate them for their initial investments. While there may have been other reasons for artists to design *shunga*, the capitalistic mind-set enveloping erotic prints points to *shunga* being produced primarily to make money off the *chōnin* class.

Audiences

Within the argument that *shunga* was a consumer product, we have discussed that *shunga* was widely available to purchase and rent, but who among the *chōnin* (or elite) did the purchasing or renting? It may be assumed that “chōnin” and “elite” simply meant “men,” because it would have been men frequenting the floating world, and in the West, porn tends to be associated more with men than women. However, the belief that only men had the time, education, and monetary freedom to purchase/ borrow books and *shunga* is a false one. Within Japanese society, women,

¹⁰⁹ Hayakawa Monta, “Who Were the Audiences for “*Shunga*?””, trans. C. Andrew Gerstle, *Japan Review*, no. 26 (2013): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41959815>.

¹¹⁰ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 303.

¹¹¹ Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 23.

especially if they were the wives or daughters of the middle-to-upper class *chōnin* or part of the elite class, would also have had high rates of literacy, enjoyed leisure time, and had extra income. There is even evidence that within the growing collection of printed reading material aimed at the masses, there were various series directed specifically at female audiences.¹¹²

As further evidence that women also had the opportunity to use *shunga* (and in fact, regularly did) we can turn again to lending libraries. Women would have been the ones at home to talk with agents and receive orders from the libraries. This meant that *shunga* would have passed by the women of the house first. Within the printed images themselves, there are several images of women bent over *shunga* brought to them by agents. If this was not reality, it was at the very least, a common motif. It also seems that *kashihon-ya* agents and other merchants would bring *shunga* and sex toys for elite, sequestered women to peruse in the confines of their homes. Furthermore, up until about 50 years ago, it seems to have been a custom among elite and wealth families to give a bride *shunga* in preparation for her marriage.¹¹³ Consequently, even if some of the images of women in *shunga* are more popular fantasy than reality, (i.e., they were the imagined activities of women using/ viewing *shunga*) there is enough historical evidence to show that women of all classes had at least the opportunity and freedom to buy, rent and view *shunga*.

Moreover, *shunga* was not just for the middle class. *Kashihon-ya*, as mentioned before, would have allowed even the poor to borrow *shunga* and it is likely that, if inclined, they could have purchased cheaply or illegally made *shunga* works. Expensive and richly designed *shunga* paintings (done in official government styles) were commissioned by the very wealthy either for themselves or as gifts.¹¹⁴ From period writings, it is clear that high-ranking samurai and

¹¹² Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 29-30.

¹¹³ Monta, "Audiences", 19, 21-23, 25.

¹¹⁴ Yano, "Historiography," 71.

government officials also enjoyed collecting and openly viewing *shunga* and discussions of sexual matters, even among mixed-gender groups, were not taboo. *Shunga* also seems to have functioned as an auspicious talisman for samurai going into battle as it was kept in their armor for protection and vitality.¹¹⁵ (This probably relates back to Japan's long history of believing in the positive power of sexually related imagery). Overall, despite being a contemporary product of *chōnin* culture, the market for *shunga*, whether they be poor quality copies or the most exquisite of handscrolls, contained literally everyone interested in seeing *shunga*.

Censorship and Repression

So far, we have seen that *shunga* was a highly integrated aspect of Edo culture. It was sold openly, given as gifts, commissioned by the rich, created by the most famous *ukiyo-e* artists, and it was, in general, just extremely popular among the *chōnin*. However, *shunga* was not exempt from government regulation. Because they deemed it corruptive to public behavior, the Tokugawa government repeatedly attempted to ban or regulate the production of *shunga* and other subgenres of *ukiyo-e*. Often times, these regulations came as part of the government's broader attempts to regulate extravagant displays of wealth and consumption of material goods by the richest, yet theoretically lowest, members of society.¹¹⁶¹¹⁷ Equally, the Tokugawa regime was very concerned with political criticism and the representation of political or elite figures of any kind. Consequently, any material containing or insinuating political or historical subtext was also subject to banishment¹¹⁸.

¹¹⁵ Monta, "Audiences", 26-34.

¹¹⁶ Buckland, *Shunga Erotic*, 30, 33.

¹¹⁷ Please see Pollack, "The Cultural," 73-76 for a discussion regarding the Tokugawa government's regulation of luxuries in the name of public morality.

¹¹⁸ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 246-248.

After decades of unregulated production, the first political “attack” on *shunga* came in 1722 with the Kyōho Reforms. These reforms were possibly initiated when authorities became aware of the political subtext and depiction of historical/ elite figures in *shunga*. All *koshokubon* (a more formal term referring to a book containing any erotic or explicit material) were banned as well as anything containing reference to the Tokugawa regime or elite historical figures. Any book that contained “gossip” or presented ideas/ opinions that differed from accepted religious/ political cannon also were banned. Furthermore, all printed material had to contain the names of the author and publisher in a colophon.¹¹⁹ This ban stopped *shunga* production for over 15 years, but ultimately it had no long term effect on *shunga* production. After the 1730’s, *shunga*’s now illegal production energetically began again. As colophons simply were not used in *shunga* production, erotic artwork essentially became “invisible” to officials. However, if there had been a truly heartfelt effort on behalf of the authorities, this information could have been easily discovered as artists “hid” their fairly obvious pseudonyms in the works themselves.¹²⁰

The Kansei Reforms (1790-1800) and the Tenpō Reforms (1841-1843) again tried to tighten control of the publishing world by forcing all material to be submitted for approval by publishing guilds and then, later, city officials. However, the “underground” nature of *shunga* production by publishers made those restrictions almost completely ineffective. The Kansei Reforms banned the use of full colored woodblock printing¹²¹ (too luxurious apparently) while the Tenpō Reforms stiffened restrictions regarding the content of woodblock images. Images of kabuki actors, courtesans, and themes associated with the these groups were forbidden. Both reforms again tried to ban illustrated erotic works, but *shunga* artists usually re-started production within

¹¹⁹ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 244.

¹²⁰ Tinios, “Japanese Illustrated,” 85.

¹²¹ Uhlenbeck and Winkel, *Japanese Erotic*, 126.

the next year or two. Especially since there seems to have been very little actual enforcement of these bans, the government's attempts at controlling the production of this popular and profitable art form proved to be useless.¹²² In essence, as long as *shunga* artists stayed away from political themes, it seems that officials had little real concern about its negative effect on the public.

This “blind eye” and general acceptance of *shunga* did not last forever. During the first years of the Meiji Era (1868-1912), there was a gradual change in cultural attitude that pushed *shunga* and any other material depicting male-female sexual relations from the realm of celebrated commodity to dangerous obscenity. In 1872, *shunga*, *abuna-e*, sex toys, public nakedness, and mixed bathhouses were all banned. In 1878, explicit photos and single sheet *shunga* were banned by authorities in their attempt to further repress *shunga*. By 1905, it seems that *shunga* production was still an “open” secret, but with Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War and its increased international presence, *shunga* became completely taboo within Japanese culture. Sadly, it would not be until 1989 that *shunga* would once again be published in Japan in an unedited, uncensored book aimed at a small group of scholarly researchers.¹²³

Conclusion

Only by placing *shunga* within the appropriate cultural and economic contexts are we able to see that *shunga* was far more than just a genre of erotic art. Based primarily in popular urban culture, *shunga* was created in the *ukiyo-e* style by the most famous artists of the period. As art, magnetized genitals, clothing, and voyeurism were masterfully incorporated with narrative dialogue, open locations, and diverse characters to create beautifully complex scenes of eroticism. As a commodity, it was produced by the publishing industries to satisfy the demand for

¹²² Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 247. Please see page 246-253 and pages 274-288 for a more in- depth look at these reforms.

¹²³ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 278-286.

entertaining material by an educated and wealthy audience. It proved to be profitable for the printing/ publishing industries as it acted as a steady source of material and methods of production were highly cost effective. Lastly, it was bought, borrowed, and viewed (or at least was available to) all people in Tokugawa society.

It has only been in the years since 1989 that Japanese scholars have been able to openly research *shunga*. While the 100 year taboo seems to have been removed from the publishing world, it is unfortunately still a somewhat sensitive topic in Japan.¹²⁴ It is sad that such a historically celebrated genre of art has been forced to the periphery of Japanese culture, especially given that *shunga* was a very normalized aspect of Edo urban culture. Hopefully, as scholarly research in both the West and in Japan continues to be conducted and museum exhibitions of *shunga* become more common, especially in Japan, remaining stigma surrounding these erotic prints will be removed. Just remember, research on *shunga* should only be carried out at the intellectual level. As the popular *haiku* says: Foolish couple / imitating *shunga* / sprained back.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Clark et al., *Shunga Sex*, 287-288.

¹²⁵ Monta, *Ten Questions*, 49.